Climate disasters challenge right to safe and adequate housing

Newstex Blogs

Climate Home News

August 22, 2024 Thursday 9:18 PM EST

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Length: 1169 words

Body

August 22nd, 2024 (Climate Home News — Delivered by Newstex)

Climate disasters displace millions of people each year.

In 2023, the figure reached 26.4 million worldwide as a result of floods, storms, wildfires and other disasters, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

Climate change is not solely responsible, but the frequency and intensity of extreme weather is increasing as global temperatures continue to rise. As a result we can expect that more and more people will face losing their homes and their livelihoods.

It is commonplace to see people boarding up their homes and literally battening down the hatches before a major hurricane is predicted to make landfall. For those facing extreme weather, this mentality is no longer confined to one-off events, but a regular mindset as the climate crisis continues to bite. Many communities around the world know that building resilience against intense storms, floods and heat waves is now essential to daily life.

'No country is immune to disaster displacement,' Alexandra Bilak, IDMC's director, said in a recent press statement. 'But we can see a difference in how displacement affects people in countries that prepare and plan for its impacts and those that don't. Those that look at the data and make prevention, response and long-term development plans that consider displacement fare far better.'

This kind of planning is happening in countries on the front line of the climate crisis. Some small island nations, for example - many of them low-lying - are seeing their homes permanently washed into the Pacific Ocean.

Paradise lost

According to Fiji's government, disaster events in the Pacific island state over the past 40 years have led to annual economic damages of around US$16 million, with 40,000 people impacted each year. This is due to increase to an average of US$85 million per year in losses, as a result of cyclones and earthquakes. These figures are high for a country with a population of under 1 million people.

Many of the people most impacted by climate disasters live in informal urban settlements. Their homes are extremely vulnerable to the regular cyclones that hit the island nation, especially as they are often located near riverbanks or around the coast.

The subtle art of scaling up climate adaptation

A recent Adaptation Fund project in Fiji was designed to build resilience against regular extreme weather events and 'climate proof' housing for the foreseeable future. The project, implemented by UN-Habitat, looked at ways to

protect thousands of homes when storm surges overwhelm local water and sanitation infrastructure. The settlements were located across four main urban areas on the island: Lautoka, Sigatoka, Nadi and Lami.

Low-cost, high-impact

Constructing cyclone-resilient buildings was an essential component of the work.

Moving new homes away from vulnerable hot spots, such as foreshores, floodplains and riverbanks, was a first step. As many settlements are self-built, training local people in new construction methods ensures future homes can be built with extreme weather in mind. An innovative element from the project was so-called 'stilted safe rooms' - low-cost and simple raised structures intended to provide refuge during periods of intense flooding.

Flood control is a key component of climate-proofing infrastructure. In Fiji, priorities included building upgraded site drainage to reduce runoff; upgrading water sources and storage; and improving access ways, to ensure people can respond when cyclones put pressure on local infrastructure.

School's out

In Haiti, a very poor and conflict-torn country beset with repeated natural disasters, climate-proofing infrastructure is still at an early stage. The country's education sector, for example, has been repeatedly hit by extreme weather, including in 2016 when Hurricane Matthew damaged a quarter of its schools. Rebuilding after such frequent turmoil now requires new ways of thinking.

With the help of around US$10 million of funding from the Adaptation Fund, UNESCO is currently supporting the restoration of 620 schools across the country. Their work has included raising awareness of disaster risk reduction, improving knowledge of safety levels, and retrofitting existing buildings.

As climate disasters grow, early warning systems become essential

Panaroty Ferdinand Prophete, UNESCO's national coordinator, told Climate Home that 'nearly 200 technicians, students and experts received training on new construction techniques, an early warning system and the management of temporary shelters.' This training included working directly with the Ministry of Education to develop new construction standards for schools.

Over 150,000 students have so far benefited from the project, a success Prophete attributes to 'very good synergy' between the different stakeholders. 'This makes it easy to put in place a community emergency plan as well as the execution of the national action plan for resilient school infrastructure,' he added.

Best defence

Experts agree that we need to change the way we live in response to climate disasters. Moving settlements away from major water sources is, if possible, a simple solution. More projects supported by the Adaptation Fund - from Indonesia to Antigua and Barbuda - are focusing on blocking, redirecting or draining excess water as it comes in, to keep homes intact and habitable. These responses will remain some of our best defence against more unpredictable and extreme weather.

'A key sector for the Adaptation Fund is averting and reducing loss and damage through disaster risk reduction and early warning systems, which account for about 16% of the Fund's current portfolio. Many additional multi-sector projects also include elements that are building resilience to disasters,' said Mikko Ollikainen, head of the Adaptation Fund.

'From climate-proofing homes and community centres to making informal settlements resilient to floods, it's a vital aspect of the Fund's work. Many of the projects are replicable and scalable so we hope they will also serve as models to create a larger positive impact on additional vulnerable communities beyond those served by the projects,' he added.

There is only so much adaptation can achieve if the flood waters get too high, or if cyclones increase in intensity and destructive force. But there are many cost-effective solutions to offer people a better chance of keeping their homes intact when extreme weather hits.

These investments can't come soon enough for communities living in climate hot-spots and can serve to tackle long standing poverty issues at the same time. Fast-tracking these solutions will become ever more important if we want to reduce the millions of newly displaced people each year.

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The post Climate disasters challenge right to safe and adequate housing appeared first on Climate Home News.

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Load-Date: August 22, 2024